

The Shadow of Cleopatra's Eyes

This presentation explores how modern American women have often invoked classical archetypes in their makeup and hairstyles in order to represent themselves as virtuous maidens, sultry queens, or fierce warrior princesses. In turn, these images, originally based on specific works of ancient art, have transformed popular conceptions of what women in the ancient world actually looked like. Cleopatra's eyes, contrary to her ancient representation on coins or most statues, are perpetually rimmed with dark kohl in our imagination, thanks to Elizabeth Taylor and her predecessors. Meanwhile, Cleopatra's skin tone has varied dramatically depending on the specific era and goal of the directors.

In particular, popular adaptations of the "classical toilette" tend to reduce ancient women to one of these "goddess" archetypes of maiden/ warrior/ beauty queen, rather than drawing on actual historical models. We see few modern fashion models or socialites strolling down the catwalk with Agrippina or Faustina's hairstyles, whereas we see many in demure chignons or Kore-echoing styles. For instance, at the 2003 Met Costume Ball, which had the theme of "Goddess," women wore a wide variety of Greek and Roman-inspired gowns but chose extremely modern hairstyles, most going for a simple ponytail or, at best, Aphrodite-esque soft curls under a headband.

Classical hair and makeup is often used by modern women to express aspirational desires not only for beauty but for power. Ironically, despite the misogyny of the actual classical world, its reception and legacy features the idealization of many powerful female figures, from Aphrodite to Athena to the Amazons. "Warrior woman" fashion is currently prominent in films, where the Amazons of Themyscira in the new *Wonder Woman* (2017) are so far most notable for their shiny metal pointed breastplates, not dissimilar to Artemisia's fashion choices in *300: Rise*

of an Empire (2014). The hairstyles of these Amazon warriors, however, are distinctly demure and mostly seem to involve French braids. All women on Themyscira apparently have access to eyebrow wax and bright red lipstick. Various music stars who depict themselves as Aphrodite or Venus similarly mix 1980s and 2010s fashion styles and hair with flowing white gowns and metal breastplates.

Meanwhile, Elizabeth Taylor's interpretation of Cleopatra continues to inspire women who seek to imagine themselves as simultaneously powerful and sexy. The makeup artist Pat McGrath recently styled Kim Kardashian as a futuristic Tayloresque Cleopatra, placing elements of Taylor's golden phoenix cloak on Kardashian's eyebrows. She also contributed to John Galliano's 2004 Dior couture collection, which was inspired by Cleopatra and featured multiple Egyptian goddess outfits.

When fashion and makeup designers look to the classical past for inspiration, they seek to wrap themselves in a certain image of antiquity. In turn, this somewhat limited vision helps define what ancient women look like for a popular audience. Life imitates modern art imitating classical art. We are left with a portrait of a goddess-figure who is both unimaginably exotic and, through her hairstyle, comfortably relatable and ordinary according to contemporaneous standards.